

CHAPTER VII.

THE WITCHCRAFT.

THE history of the years between the dissolution of the Company of Massachusetts Bay and the reorganization of the country by William III. in 1692 has little bearing upon the development of the people; for the presidency of Dudley and the administration of Andros were followed by a revolution that paralyzed all movement. During the latter portion of this interval the colony was represented at London by three agents, of whom Increase Mather was the most influential, who used every effort to obtain the reëstablishment of the old government; they met, however, with insuperable obstacles. Quietly to resume was impossible; for the obstinacy of the clergy, in refusing all compromise with Charles II., had caused the patent to be cancelled; and thus a new grant had become necessary. Nor was this all, for the attorney and solicitor general, with whom the two chief justices concurred,¹ gave it as their opinion that, supposing no decree had been rendered, and the same powers were exercised as before, a writ of *scire facias* would certainly be issued, upon which a similar judgment would inevitably be entered. These considerations, however,

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¹ *Parentator*, p. 139.

became immaterial, as the king was a statesman, and had already decided upon his policy. His views had little in common with those held by the Massachusetts ecclesiastics, and when the Rev. Mr. Mather first read the instrument in which they had been embodied, he declared he "would sooner part with his life than consent unto such minutes."¹ He grew calmer, however, when told that his "consent was not expected nor desired;" and with that energy and decision for which he was remarkable, at once secured the patronage.

The constitutional aspect of the Provincial Charter is profoundly interesting, and it will be considered in its legal bearings hereafter. Its political tendencies, however, first demand attention, for it wrought a complete social revolution, since it overthrew the temporal power of the church. Massachusetts, Maine, and Plymouth were consolidated, and within them toleration was established, except in regard to Papists; the religious qualification was swept away, and in its stead freeholders of forty shillings per annum, or owners of personal property to the value of forty pounds sterling, were admitted to the franchise; the towns continued to elect the house of representatives, and the whole Assembly chose the council, subject to the approval of the executive.² The governor, lieutenant-governor, and secretary were appointed by the crown; the governor had a veto, and the king reserved the right to disallow legislation within three years of the date of its enactment. Thus the theoc-

¹ *Parentator*, p. 134.

² *Hutch. Hist.* ii. 15, 16.

racy fell at a single blow ; and it is worthy of remark that thenceforward prosecutions for sedition became unknown among the people of the Province of Massachusetts Bay. Yet, though the clerical oligarchy was no longer absolute, the ministers still exerted a prodigious influence upon opinion. Not only did they speak with all the authority inherited with the traditions of the past ; not only had they or their predecessors trained the vast majority of the people from their cradles to reverence them more than anything on earth, but their compact organization was as yet unimpaired, and at its head stood the two Mathers, the pastors of the Old North Church. Thus venerated and thus led, the elders were still able to appeal to the popular superstition and fanaticism with terrible effect.

Widely differing judgments have been formed of these two celebrated divines ; the ecclesiastical view is perhaps well summed up by the Rev. John Eliot, who thus describes the President of Harvard : " He was the father of the New England clergy, and his name and character were held in veneration, not only by those, who knew him, but by succeeding generations." ¹ All must admit his ability and learning, while in sanctimoniousness of deportment he was unrivalled. His son Cotton says he had such a " gravity as made all sorts of persons, wherever he came, to be struck with a sensible awe of his presence, . . . yea, if he laughed on them, they believed it not." " His very counte-

¹ *Biographical Dictionary*, p. 312.

nance carried the force of a sermon with it.”¹ He kept a strict account of his mental condition, and always was pleased when able to enter in his diary at the end of the day, “heart serious.” He was unctuous in his preaching, and wept much in the pulpit; he often mentions being “quickened at the Lord’s table [during which] tears gushed from me before the Lord,”² but of his self-sacrifice, his mercy, and his truth, his own acts and words are the best evidence that remain.

When the new government was about to be put in operation, an extraordinary amount of patronage lay at the disposal of the crown; for, beside the regular executive officers, the entire council had to be named, since they could not be elected until a legislature had been organized to choose them. Increase Mather, Elisha Cooke, and Thomas Oakes were acting as agents, and all had been bitterly opposed to the new charter; but of the three, the English ministers thought Mather the most important to secure. And now an odd coincidence happened in the life of this singular man. He suddenly one day announced himself convinced that the king’s project was not so intolerable as to be unworthy of support; and then it very shortly transpired that he had been given all the spoil before the patent had passed the seals.³ The proximity of these events is interesting as bearing on the methods of ecclesiastical statesmen, and it is also

¹ *Parentator*, p. 40.

² *Parentator*, p. 48.

³ Palfrey, iv. 85.

instructive to observe how thorough a master of the situation this eminent divine proved himself to be. He not only appointed all his favorite henchmen to office, but he rigidly excluded his colleagues at London, who had continued their opposition, and every one else who had any disposition to be independent. His creature, Sir William Phips, was made governor; William Stoughton, who was bred for the church, and whose savage bigotry endeared him to the clergy, was lieutenant-governor; and the council was so packed that his excellent son broke into a shout of triumph when he heard the news:—

“The time has come! the set time has come! I am now to receive an answer of so many prayers. All the councillors of the province are of my own father’s nomination; and my father-in-law, with several related unto me, and several brethren of my own church are among them. The governor of the province is not my enemy, but one whom I baptized; namely, Sir William Phips, one of my own flock, and one of my dearest friends.”¹ Such was the government theocracy left the country as its legacy when its own power had passed away, and dearly did Massachusetts rue that fatal gift in her paroxysms of agony and blood.

At the close of the sixteenth century the belief in witchcraft was widespread, and among the more ignorant well-nigh universal. The superstition was, moreover, fostered by the clergy, who, in adopting this

¹ Cotton Mather’s *Diary*; Quincy’s *History of Harvard*, i. 60.

policy, were undoubtedly actuated by mixed motives. Their credulity probably made them for the most part sincere in the unbounded confidence they professed in the possibility of compacts between the devil and mankind; but, nevertheless, there is abundant evidence in their writings of their having been keenly alive to the fact that men horror-stricken at the sight of the destruction of their wives and children by magic would grovel in the submission of abject terror at the feet of the priest who promised to deliver them.

The elders began the agitation by sending out a paper of proposals for collecting stories of apparitions and witchcrafts, and in obedience to their wish Increase Mather published his "Illustrious Providences" in 1683-4. Two chapters of this book were devoted to sorceries, and the reverend author took occasion to intimate his opinion that those who might doubt the truth of his relations were probably themselves either heretics or wizards. This movement of the clergy seems to have highly inflamed the popular imagination,¹ yet no immediate disaster followed; and the nervous exaltation did not become deadly until 1688. In the autumn of that year four children of a Boston mason named Goodwin began to mimic the symptoms they had so often heard described; the father, who was a pious man, called in the ministers of Boston and Charlestown, who fasted and prayed, and succeeded in delivering the youngest, who was five. Meanwhile, one of the daughters had "cried out

¹ Hutch. *Hist.* ii. 24.

upon" an unfortunate Irish washerwoman, with whom she had quarrelled. Cotton Mather was now in his element. He took the eldest girl home with him and tried a great number of interesting experiments as to the relative power of Satan and the Lord; among others he gravely relates how when the sufferer was tormented elsewhere he would carry her struggling to his own study, into which entering, she stood immediately upon her feet, and cried out, "They are gone! They are gone! They say they cannot — God won't let 'em come here."¹

It is not credible that an educated and a sane man could ever have honestly believed in the absurd stuff which he produced as evidence of the supernatural; his description of the impudence of the children is amazing.

"They were divers times very near burning or drowning of themselves, but . . . by their own piti-ful and seasonable cries for help still procured their deliverance: which made me consider, whether the little ones had not their angels, in the plain sense of our Saviour's intimation. . . . And sometimes, tho' but seldome, they were kept from eating their meals, by having their teeth sett when they carried any thing to their mouthes."²

And it was upon such evidence that the washerwoman was hanged. There is an instant in the battle as the ranks are wavering, when the calmness of

¹ *Memorable Providences*, pp. 27, 28.

² *Idem*, pp. 15-17.

the officers will avert the rout; and as to have held their soldiers then is deemed their highest honor, so to have been found wanting is their indelible disgrace; the people stood poised upon the panic's brink, their pastors lashed them in.

Cotton Mather forthwith published a terrific account of the ghostly crisis, mixed with denunciations of the Sadducee or Atheist who disbelieved; and to the book was added a preface, written by the four other clergymen who had assisted with their prayers, the character of which may be judged by a single extract. "The following account will afford to him that shall read with observation, a further clear confirmation, that, there is both a God, and a devil, and witchcraft: that there is no outward affliction, but what God may, (and sometimes doth) permit Satan to trouble his people withal."¹ Not content with this, Mather goaded his congregation into frenzy from the pulpit. "Consider also, the misery of them whom witchcraft may be let loose upon. What is it to fall into the hands of devils? . . . O what a direful thing is it, to be prickt with pins, and stab'd with knives all over, and to be fill'd all over with broken bones? 'Tis impossible to reckon up the varieties of miseries which those monsters inflict where they can have a blow. No less than death, and that a languishing and a terrible death will satisfie the rage of those formidable dragons."² The pest was sure to spread in a credulous

¹ *Memorable Providences*, Preface.

² *Discourse on Witchcraft*, p. 19.

community, fed by their natural leaders with this morbid poison, and it next broke out in Salem village in February, 1691-2. A number of girls had become intensely excited by the stories they had heard, and two of them, who belonged to the family of the clergyman, were seized with the usual symptoms. Of Mr. Parris it is enough to say that he began the investigation with a frightful relish. Other ministers were called in, and prayer-meetings lasting all day were held, with the result of throwing the patients into convulsions.¹ Then the name of the witch was asked, and the girls were importuned to make her known. They refused at first, but soon the pressure became too strong, and the accusations began. Among the earliest to be arrested and examined was Goodwife Cory. Mr. Noyes, teacher of Salem, began with prayer, and when she was brought in the sufferers "did vehemently accuse her of afflicting them, by biting, pinching, strangling, &c., and they said, they did in their fits see her likeness coming to them, and bringing a book for them to sign."² By April the number of informers and of the suspected had greatly increased and the prisons began to fill. Mr. Parris behaved like a madman; not only did he preach inflammatory sermons, but he conducted the examinations, and his questions were such that the evidence was in truth nothing but what he put in the mouths of the witnesses; yet he seems to have been guilty of

¹ Calef's *More Wonders*, p. 90 *et seq.*

² *Idem*, p. 92.

a darker crime, for there is reason to suppose he garbled the testimony it was his sacred duty to truly record.¹ And in all this he appears to have had the approval and the aid of Mr. Noyes. Such was the crisis when Sir William Phips landed on the 14th of May, 1692; he was the Mathers' tool, and the result could have been foretold. Uneducated and credulous, he was as clay in the hands of his creators; and his first executive act was to cause the miserable prisoners to be fettered. Jonathan Cory has described what befell his wife: "Next morning the jaylor put irons on her legs (having received such a command) the weight of them was about eight pounds; these irons and her other afflictions, soon brought her into convulsion fits, so that I thought she would have died that night."²

At the beginning of June the governor, by an arbitrary act, created a court to try the witches, and at its head put William Stoughton. Even now it is impossible to read the proceedings of this sanguinary tribunal without a shudder, and it has left a stain upon the judiciary of Massachusetts that can never be effaced.

Two weeks later the opinion of the elders was asked, as it had been of old, and they recommended the "speedy and vigorous prosecutions of such as have rendered themselves obnoxious,"³ nor did their

¹ *Grounds of Complaint against Parris*, § 6; *More Wonders*, p. 96 (i. e. 56).

² *More Wonders*, p. 97.

³ *Hutch. Hist.* ii. 53.

advice fall upon unwilling ears. Stoughton was already at work, and certain death awaited all who were dragged before that cruel and bloodthirsty bigot; even when the jury acquitted, the court refused to receive the verdict. The accounts given of the legal proceedings seem monstrous. The preliminary examinations were conducted amid such "hideous clamours and screechings," that frequently the voice of the defendant was drowned, and if a defence was attempted at a trial, the victim was browbeaten and mocked by the bench.¹

The ghastly climax was reached in the case of George Burroughs, who had been the clergyman at Wells. At his trial the evidence could hardly be heard by reason of the fits of the sufferers. "The chief judge asked the prisoner, who he thought hindered these witnesses from giving their testimonies? and he answered, he supposed it was the devil. That honourable person then replied, How comes the devil so loath to have any testimony born against you? Which cast him into very great confusion." Presently the informers saw the ghosts of his two dead wives, whom they charged him with having murdered, stand before him "crying for vengeance;" yet though much appalled, he steadily denied that they were there. He also roused his judges' ire by asserting that "there neither are, nor ever were, witches."²

He and those to die with him were carried through

¹ *More Wonders*, p. 102.

² *Idem*. pp. 115-119.

the streets of Salem in a cart. As he climbed the ladder he called God to witness he was innocent, and his words were so pathetic that the people sobbed aloud, and it seemed as though he might be rescued even as he stood beneath the tree. Then when at last he swung above them, Cotton Mather rode among the throng and told them of his guilt, and how the fiend could come to them as an angel of light, and so the work went on. They cut him down and dragged him by his halter to a shallow hole among the rocks, and threw him in, and there they lay together with the rigid hand of the wizard Burroughs still pointing upward through his thin shroud of earth.¹

By October it seemed as though the bonds of society were dissolving; nineteen persons had been hanged, one had been pressed to death, and eight lay condemned; a number had fled, but their property had been seized and they were beggars; the prisons were choked, while more than two hundred were accused and in momentary fear of arrest;² even two dogs had been killed. The plague propagated itself; for the only hope for those cried out upon was to confess their guilt and turn informers. Thus no one was safe. Mr. Willard, pastor of the Old South, who began to falter, was threatened; the wife of Mr. Hale, pastor of Beverly, who had been one of the great leaders of the prosecutions, was denounced; Lady Phips herself was named. But the race who peopled New Eng-

¹ *More Wonders*, pp. 103, 104.

² *Idem*, p. 110.

land had a mental vigor which even the theocracy could not subdue, and Massachusetts had among her sons liberal and enlightened men, whose voice was heard, even in the madness of the terror. Of these, the two Brattles, Robert Calef, and John Leverett were the foremost; and they served their mother well, though the debt of gratitude and honor which she owes them she has never yet repaid.

On the 8th, four days before the meeting of the legislature, and probably at the first moment it could be done with safety, Thomas Brattle wrote an admirable letter,¹ in which he exposed the folly and wickedness of the delusion with all the energy the temper of the time would bear; had he miscalculated, his error of judgment would probably have cost him his life. At the meeting of the General Court the illegal and blood-stained commission came to an end, and as the reaction slowly and surely set in, Phips began to feel alarm lest he should be called to account in England; accordingly, he tried to throw the blame on Stoughton: "When I returned, I found people much dissatisfied at the proceedings of the court; . . . The deputy-governor, [Stoughton] notwithstanding, persisted vigorously in the same method. . . . When I put an end to the court, there was at least fifty persons in prison, in great misery by reason of the extreme cold and their poverty. . . . I permitted a special superior court to be held at Salem, . . . on the third day of January, the lieutenant-governor being

¹ *Mass. Hist. Coll.* first series, v. 61.

chief judge. . . . All . . . were cleared, saving three. . . . The deputy-governor signed a warrant for their speedy execution, and also of five others who were condemned at the former court. . . . But . . . I sent a reprieve; . . . the lieutenant-governor upon this occasion was enraged and filled with passionate anger, and refused to sit upon the bench at a superior court, at that time held at Charlestown; and, indeed, hath from the beginning hurried on these matters with great precipitancy, and by his warrant hath caused the estates, goods, and chattels of the executed to be seized and disposed of without my knowledge or consent."¹ Some months earlier, also, just before the meeting of the legislature, he had called on Cotton Mather to defend him against the condemnation he had even then begun to feel, and the elder had responded with a volume which remains as a memorial of him and his compeers.² He gave thanks for the blood that had already flowed, and prayed to God for more. "They were some of the gracious words, inserted in the advice, which many of the neighbouring ministers, did this summer humbly lay before our honourable judges: 'We cannot but with all thankfulness, acknowledge the success which the merciful God has given unto the sedulous and assiduous endeavours of our honourable rulers, to detect the abominable witchcrafts which have been committed in the

¹ Phips to the Earl of Nottingham, Feb. 21, 1693. Palfrey, iv. 112, note 2.

² *Wonders of the Invisible World*.

country; humbly praying that the discovery of those mysterious and mischievous wickednesses, may be perfected.' If in the midst of the many dissatisfactions among us, the publication of these trials, may promote such a pious thankfulness unto God, for justice being so far, executed among us, I shall rejoyce that God is glorified; and pray that no wrong steps of ours may ever sully any of his glorious works."¹

"These witches . . . have met in hellish rendezvous. . . . In these hellish meetings, these monsters have associated themselves to do no less a thing than to destroy the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, in these parts of the world. . . . We are truly come into a day, which by being well managed might be very glorious, for the exterminating of those, accursed things, . . . But if we make this day quarrelsome, . . . Alas, O Lord, my flesh trembles for fear of thee, and I am afraid of thy judgments."²

While reading such words the streets of Salem rise before the eyes, with the cart dragging Martha Cory to the gallows while she protests her innocence, and there, at her journey's end, at the gibbet's foot, stands the Rev. Nicholas Noyes, pointing to the dangling corpses, and saying: "What a sad thing it is to see eight firebrands of hell hanging there."³

The sequence of cause and effect is sufficiently obvious. Although at a moment when the panic had

¹ *Wonders of the Invisible World*, pp. 82, 83.

² *Idem*, pp. 49-60.

³ *More Wonders*, p. 108.

got beyond control, even the most ultra of the clergy had been forced by their own danger to counsel moderation, the conservatives were by no means ready to abandon their potent allies from the lower world; the power they gave was too alluring. " 'Tis a strange passage recorded by Mr. Clark, in the life of his father, That the people of his parish refusing to be reclaimed from their Sabbath breaking, by all the zealous testimonies which that good man bore against it; at last [one night] . . . there was heard a great noise, with rattling of chains, up and down the town, and an horrid scent of brimstone. . . . Upon which the guilty consciences of the wretches, told them, the devil was come to fetch them away; and it so terrify'd them, that an eminent reformation follow'd the sermons which that man of God preached thereupon." ¹ They therefore saw the constant acquittals, the abandonment of prosecutions, and the growth of incredulity with regret. The next year Cotton Mather laid bare the workings of their minds with cynical frankness. "The devils have with most horrendous operations broke in upon our neighbourhood, and God has at such a rate overruled all the fury and malice of those devils, that . . . the souls of many, especially of the rising generation, have been thereby waken'd unto some acquaintance with religion; our young people who belonged unto the praying meetings, of both sexes, apart would ordinarily spend whole nights by the whole weeks together in prayers and psalms upon

¹ *Wonders of the Invisible World*, p. 65.

these occasions ; . . . and some scores of other young people, who were strangers to real piety, were now struck with the lively demonstrations of hell . . . before their eyes. . . . In the whole — the devil got just nothing, but God got praises, Christ got subjects, the Holy Spirit got temples, the church got addition, and the souls of men got everlasting benefits.”¹

Mather prided himself on what he had done. “I am not so vain as to say that any wisdom or virtue of mine did contribute unto this good order of things ; but I am so just as to say, I did not hinder this good.”² Men with such beliefs, and lured onward by such temptations, were incapable of letting the tremendous power superstition gave them slip from their grasp without an effort on their own behalf ; and accordingly it was not long before the Mathers were once more at work. On the 10th of September, 1693, or about nine months after the last spasms at Salem, and when the belief in enchantments was fast falling into disrepute, a girl named Margaret Rule was taken with the accustomed symptoms in Boston. Forthwith these two godly divines repaired to her bedside, and this is what took place : —

Then Mr. M—— father and son came up, and others with them, in the whole were about thirty or forty persons, they being sat, the father on a stool, and the son upon the bedside by her, the son began to question her :

¹ *More Wonders*, p. 12.

² *Idem*, p. 12.

Margaret Rule, how do you do? Then a pause without any answer.

Question. What. Do there a great many witches sit upon you? *Answer.* Yes.

Question. Do you not know that there is a hard master?

Then she was in a fit. He laid his hand upon her face and nose, but, as he said, without perceiving breath; then he brush'd her on the face with his glove, and rubb'd her stomach (her breast not being covered with the bed clothes) and bid others do so too, and said it eased her, then she revived.

Q. Don't you know there is a hard master? *A.* Yes.

Reply. Don't serve that hard master, you know who.

Q. Do you believe? Then again she was in a fit, and he again rub'd her breast &c. . . . He wrought his fingers before her eyes and asked her if she saw the witches? *A.* No. . . .

Q. Who is it that afflicts you? *A.* I know not, there is a great many of them. . . .

Q. You have seen the black man, hant you? *A.* No.

Reply. I hope you never shall.

Q. You have had a book offered you, hant you? *A.* No.

Q. The brushing of you gives you ease, don't it? *A.* Yes. She turn'd herself, and a little groan'd.

Q. Now the witches scratch you, and pinch you,

and bite you, don't they? A. Yes. Then he put his hand upon her breast and belly, viz. on the clothes over her, and felt a living thing, as he said; which moved the father also to feel, and some others.

Q. Don't you feel the live thing in the bed?

A. No. . . .

Q. Shall we go to pray . . . spelling the word.

A. Yes. The father went to prayer for perhaps half an hour, chiefly against the power of the devil and witchcraft, and that God would bring out the afflictors. . . . After prayer he [the son] proceeded.

Q. You did not hear when we were at prayer did you? A. Yes.

Q. You don't hear always? you don't hear sometimes past a word or two, do you? A. No. Then turning him about said, this is just another Mercy Short. . . .

Q. What does she eat or drink? A. Not eat at all; but drink rum.¹

To sanctify to the godly the ravings of this drunken and abandoned wench was a solemn joy to the heart of this servant of Christ, who gave his life to "unwearied cares and pains, to rescue the miserable from the lions and bears of hell,"² therefore he prepared another tract. But his hour was well-nigh come. Though it was impossible that retribution should be meted out to him for his crimes, at least he did not

¹ *More Wonders*, pp. 13, 14.

² *Idem*, p. 10.

escape unscathed, for Calef and the Brattles, who had long been on his father's track and his, now seized him by the throat. He knew well they had been with him in the chamber of Margaret Rule, that they had gathered all the evidence; and so when Calef sent him a challenge to stand forth and defend himself, he shuffled and equivocated.

At length a rumor spread abroad that a volume was to be published exposing the whole black history, and then the priest began to cower. His Diary is full of his prayers and lamentations. "The book is printed, and the impression is this week arrived here. . . . I set myself to humble myself before the Lord under these humbling and wondrous dispensations, and obtain the pardon of my sins, that have rendered me worthy of such dispensations. . . .

"28d. 10m. Saturday. — The Lord has permitted Satan to raise an extraordinary storm upon my father and myself. All the rage of Satan against the holy churches of the Lord falls upon us. First Calf's book, and then Coleman's, do set the people in a mighty ferment. All the adversaries of the churches lay their heads together, as if, by blasting of us, they hoped utterly to blow up all. The Lord fills my soul with consolations, inexpressible consolations, when I think on my conformity to my Lord Jesus Christ in the injuries and reproaches that are cast upon me. . . .

"5d. 2m. Saturday [1701]. — I find the enemies of the churches are set with an implacable enmity against myself; and one vile fool, namely, R. Calf, is employed

by them to go on with more of his filthy scribbles to hurt my precious opportunities of glorifying my Lord Jesus Christ. I had need be much in prayer unto my glorious Lord that he would preserve his poor servant from the malice of this evil generation, and of that vile man particularly.”¹

“More Wonders of the Invisible World” appeared in 1700, and such was the terror the clergy still inspired it is said it had to be sent to London to be printed, and when it was published no bookseller in Boston dared to offer it in his shop.² Yet though it was burnt in the college yard by the order of Increase Mather, it was widely read, and dealt the death-blow to the witchcraft superstition of New England. It did more than this: it may be said to mark an era in the intellectual development of Massachusetts, for it shook to its centre that moral despotism which the pastors still kept almost unimpaired over the minds of their congregations, by demonstrating to the people the necessity of thinking for themselves. But what the fate of its authors would have been had the priests still ruled may be guessed by the onslaught made on them by those who sat at the Mathers’ feet. “Spit on, Calf; thou shalt be but like the viper on Pauls hand, easily shaken off, and without any damage to the servant of the Lord.”³

¹ *Mass. Hist. Soc. Proc.* 1855-58, pp. 290-293.

² *Some Few Remarks*, p. 9.

³ *Idem*, p. 22.